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Adorno and the Sublime in Live Performance

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Adorno's re-conceptualisation of the traditional concept of the sublime, arguing that for Adorno the sublime aesthetic experience foregrounds an awareness of non-identity and the "priority of the object." For Adorno, tears, shudders, and the emotions of shock and terror remain authentic responses to artworks because they remind the ego of its affinity with nature. Adorno's treatment of the sublime in modern art and in relation to his theory of the dialectic of enlightenment invites a radical critique of the claim of reason to autonomy and control. His notion of the sublime is illustrated by the performance work of Franko B (Italy/UK) as a contemporary example of the confrontation with the bodily sublime, which produces a "limit-experience," a mode of subjective decentring as a result of our exposure to the impossible and the formless. While Adorno's "negative" sublime is devoid of reconciliatory metaphysical meaning, it calls forth an altered subjectivity that opposes the withering of experience otherwise dominant in contemporary culture.

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The sublime is an operative concept in Theodor W. Adorno's aesthetic theory as well as in his critical social theory. According to Adorno, artistic modernism, such as the works of Schoenberg, Kafka, and Beckett, among others, responds to the increasingly abstract quality of capitalist social relations by problematizing notions of harmony, beauty, representation, and meaning. Authentic modernist art gives expression to irreconcilable social contradictions and tensions on the level of artistic form and material composition, thereby echoing the collapse of modernity's utopian beliefs in social reconciliation and emancipation. However, important in Adorno's dialectical model of progressive art is the possibility of a preservation of metaphysical ideas such as freedom and reconciliation in the very moments of their collapse and demise in late capitalist social reification. As Hauke Brunkhorst has succinctly summarised: "Just as *Negative Dialectics* allows itself the thought of universal solidarity only in the moment of the *collapse* of metaphysics and in the face of its remaining ruins, so art participates in the utopian gleam of reconciliation only in *departure* from the metaphysical thought of its final *sublation* (*Aufhebung*) in life."[1] Modernist art responds mimetically to the collapse of metaphysical ideas, and in doing so it maintains them as the fractured remnants of happiness and hope. These processes of anamnesis (remembrance) and consciousness of a possibility for change become part of an aesthetic experience which

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defines itself in negative terms as resistant and emancipatory. In crucial ways this model of aesthetic experience captures the key components of the concept of the sublime as described by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, modernity's principal eighteenth-century theorists of sublimity.

For Edmund Burke (1729–97) the sublime is the effect of a threat of terror or violation that crystallises in the experience of pleasure and pain. Influenced by Longinus, the ancient Greek literary critic who defined the sublime in literature as that which elevates us and produces grandeur of thought by arousing strong emotions, Burke emphasises the effect of astonishment, rapture and the transformational power of sense perceptions. For Burke, any sense impression that evokes terror is also a source of the sublime. His analysis of the sublime emphasises its affective power, its excessive energy and overpowering corporeal effects, which cannot be comprehended rationally but push our mental capacities to the limit. Burke locates the sublime primarily in nature and draws attention to the theatricality of our encounters with its potential sources (towering mountains, raging storms, or vast oceans). The act of "viewing," the condition of being a spectator, is crucial here; yet terrifying and painful as it may be, the sublime encounter activates the instinct for "self-preservation," which is triggered by the spectator's physical exertion against the threat of annihilation in the face of the overpowering. This exertion is experienced as painfully delightful and is also what makes the encounter an *aesthetic* experience, its effects being subject to a process of distancing: "When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful."[2]

The second important eighteenth-century theory of the sublime is Kant's "Analytic of the Sublime" in his *Critique of Judgment*. More than Burke, Kant emphasises the sublime as a conceptual problem arising from the subject's overpowering experience of nature, a feeling that resists representation. What makes Kant's natural sublime nevertheless an aesthetic experience is its participation in the process of spiritualisation by means of which the subject expresses his or her agency and control over nature. In Kant's theory, the sensuous immediacy produced in the sublime encounter with nature (he lists threatening rocks, thunderclouds, volcanoes, hurricanes, boundless oceans and mighty rivers as examples) challenges and exceeds the representation of imagination (*Einbildung*).[3] But this disconcerting process is eventually controlled, tamed as it were. The mind responds to nature's magnitude and power by producing ideas of reason (concepts such as infinity, limitlessness, and totality), and in the face of unsettling sensations and overwhelming forces the subject's moral self-awareness is strengthened. The conceptual labour that is at stake in this process is, however, only fully realised when the relationship between imagination and understanding collapses and the faculty of judgment is at risk. Reaching the precarious points of an excess of boundaries and a destabilisation of forms, the subject experiences a momentary loss of autonomy (a suspension of the faculty of judgment and understanding), which, echoing Burke, Kant calls a "negative pleasure."[4]

Importantly, for Kant the sublime is a dynamic and dialectical experience of attraction and repulsion, surrender and resistance, which is captured in the interplay between extreme sensuous intuition (characteristically, the experience of the sublime object as formless and unbounded) and the exertion of the mind to respond to it. Thus the immediacy, disorder and unpredictability of the sublime event are authenticated by the effort of the mind (spirit, *Geist*) to assert its autonomy and superiority over nature. As Emily Brady has shown, for

Kant the capacity of the mind (reason) in the sublime experience is affirmed in the "movement from the sensible to the supersensible,"[5] whereby our wrestling with the finitude of our phenomenal, empirical existence produces ideas of limitlessness and infinity. Crucially, in the sublime experience subjectivity validates itself in the process of becoming aware of its relationship to nature (inside and outside). The object of the sublime feeling not only makes us realise that we are "beings of nature,"[6] but it also makes us aware that we have the capacity to express and assert our freedom from the threatening immediacy of contingent nature. Hence the sublime is no longer merely a manifestation of human passion and contradictory feelings (Burke), but becomes a gesture of transcendence, a vehicle for the assertion of reason's freedom to think beyond the limitations of the sensuous, the material, the finite.

Later developments in the discourse of the sublime, such as Fredric Jameson's and Jean-François Lyotard's applications of sublimity in the context of post-modernity, align themselves with the Kantian interest in the limits of representation, to which the object of sublime feeling draws attention. However, postmodernist accounts of the sublime also critique Kant's glorification of the subject's self-sufficiency and the triumph of reason as an expression of an enlightened bourgeois sensibility. They are less interested in exploring the sublime from the perspective of how our response to it enables us to control our relationship with the external world, but focus instead, especially Lyotard, on the sublime as an aesthetic experience of the paradoxical presentation of the unpresentable.

For Kant and for several other theorists, the object of the sublime positions us in relation to something that cannot be comprehended. Similarly, post-metaphysical philosophers such as Lyotard, Jacques Derrida and Theodor W. Adorno also focus on the subject's encounter with the other in the sublime experience. For Lyotard the sublime is primarily an ephemeral experience of shock or surprise, suggesting that something "happens" in a moment deemed intractable and resistant to communicative rational discourse. In *The Inhuman* he describes the sublime as inducing a suspension of the mind, the production of a "mindless state of mind," necessary for sensation to occur and for the ineluctable presence of the "material event" to be felt.[7] However, the event as such and the instance of its taking place remain beyond comprehension: "[w]hat memorizes or retains is not a capacity of the mind, not even accessibility to what occurs, but, in the event, the ungraspable and undeniable 'presence' of a something which is other than mind and which, 'from time to time', occurs." The postmodern sublime in Lyotard's theory thus activates heightened temporal experiences and sensations. Here the sublime designates "the event of a passion, a passibility [sic] for which the mind will not have been prepared, which will have unsettled it, and of which it conserves only the feeling—anguish and jubilation—of an obscure debt."[8] Thus for Lyotard, following Kant, the sublime is marked by a feeling of the critical mind's resistance to the overpowering senses, yet the feeling of resistance is deemed essential for reason's discovery of self-reflexivity: "it is essential for thought to feel reflexively its heterogeneity when it brings itself to its own limits (something it cannot avoid doing)." And further, "the sublime feeling... is the subjective state critical thought must feel in its being carried to its limits (therefore beyond them) and its resistance to this impetus." Lyotard's reading of Kant thus conceives the sublime not only as a challenge to the imagination but as an invitation to embrace the possibility of transcendence, a call to think beyond the given.[9]

Adorno echoes this in his definition of aesthetic thought as the production of an imaginary "more," a transcendence that gestures beyond the limiting terms of the empirically real. Sensation is an operative category in both Lyotard's and Adorno's re-conceptualisation of

the Kantian sublime—for, in Lytoard words: "[o]nly through its sensation can the thought that imagines be aware of this 'presence' without presentation."[10] Adorno, echoing Burke's theory of terror, prioritises the sensation of shudder in our reception of modern art as an expression of damage that becomes the negative imprint of resistance (and hence subjective freedom). He re-conceptualises the sublime as a critique of the dominance of identity thinking within Western philosophy, arguing that the sublime aesthetic experience foregrounds the "priority of the object,"[11] which enables the subject's awareness of its affinity with nature. Already in Kant, the sublime makes the subject aware that there is something that refuses representation and resists conceptual framing. Similarly, for Adorno the sublime remains a crucially transcendental experience, but whereas for Kant the fearful experience of sublime formlessness is resolved (controlled) in a process of successful conceptual mediation, for Adorno the conceptual work of paradox and aporia is ongoing in the face of the sublime. Adorno's treatment of the sublime in art and in his theory of the dialectic of enlightenment invites a radical critique of the claims of reason to autonomy and control of its non-rational other. First, he claims that the sublime as traditionally understood (i.e., as a product of the metaphysical claims of German Idealism) has lost its actuality and validity in the post-Auschwitz cultural context (as too the traditional concepts of tragedy and comedy). Although he does not altogether dismiss the subline and its potential value for modern aesthetic theory, he argues that to survive as a critical concept, the sublime—like other conventional aesthetic concepts—needs to undergo a critical re-conceptualisation, which is what he sets out to do in his seminal *Aesthetic Theory*.

The Kantian understanding of the sublime, as we saw, focuses on the inability of the imagination to adequately represent it and consequently the wrestling of the mind to make sense of the experience. When confronted with the limits of imagination and understanding, Kant argues, our intellectual intuition realises itself as being independent of sense perceptions and the constraints of empirical existence, enabling our reason to conceptualise the unboundedness of nature and to respond to the threatening finitude of existence with the (liberating) idea of the infinite, the transcendental, the metaphysical. This power is enhanced in the encounter with the sublime, when the beholder/spectator, driven beyond the limits of the phenomenal plane, experiences the infinite totality of the world. The kind of "knowledge" provided by this experience is negative and aesthetic: we know that ultimately we cannot know and that the only anchor of our not-knowing is intuition and bodily sensation.

Developing this strand in Kant's analytic of the sublime, Lyotard argues that modern avant-garde art is an art of the sublime because it presents the unpresentable, or to use Hegelian/metaphysical language, because it stages a negative relationship with the Absolute: the Absolute is lost, absent, unattainable, and art bears the scars of this loss. For Hegel, the Absolute (the Idea, the Spirit) manifests itself in the sensuous appearance of the artwork, whereas in Lyotard's and Adorno's post-metaphysical accounts this kind of positive manifestation is no longer conceivable and art becomes a medium for negative presentation.

Adorno's "negative" sublime is devoid of reconciliatory metaphysical messages and places meaning on trial in the spirit of Samuel Beckett's radically non-communicative plays. For Adorno, as he writes in *Aesthetic Theory*, tears, shudders, and the emotions of shock and terror remain authentic responses to artworks because they remind the subject of its deliverance over to the non-conceptual other; in other words, they make us recall our "affinity with nature."[12] Adorno's divergence from Kant's metaphysical model of the natural sublime is expressed thus:

> Rather than that, as Kant thought, spirit in the face of nature becomes aware of its own superiority, it becomes aware of its own natural essence. This is the moment when the subject, vis-à-vis the sublime, is moved to tears. Recollection of nature breaks the arrogance of his self-positing: 'My tears well up; earth, I am returning to you'. (276)

The momentum of transcendence is not lost in this emotive relation to the other; on the contrary, the pathos of nature that is released in the aesthetic experience induces a sense of freedom from the "spell" (Adorno also calls it "imprisonment"), which the subject, in the spirit of the enlightenment, casts over nature and over itself. The aesthetic experience of the sublime is also linked to the process of spiritualisation and semblance inherent in the artwork, producing the effect of a "more," an illusion, an "as if," which removes the artwork from its embeddedness in the empirical world. But this transcendental effect is nevertheless a product of art's objectivation: it appears, even when it is an event, as a "thing-in-itself," a composed unity of some sort. Objectivation, the artwork's inevitable reified character, is juxtaposed with semblance, art's production of an illusion, an "as if" triggering the presence of otherness (difference, the non-identical) within the artwork and thus undermining the work's status as object. One could say that semblance introduces temporality whereby the artwork is experienced as a fleeting appearance. Modernism, according to Adorno, rejected the representational semblance character of art, "the illusion of the being-in-itself of works" (102), through techniques of dissonance, fragmentation and montage, as evident in the modernist movements of Expressionism, Cubism, Dadaism, and Surrealism. However, whilst Adorno recognised the importance of the aesthetic principles of disintegration and self-reflexivity— "[a]rt must turn against itself, in opposition to its own concept, and thus become uncertain of itself right into its innermost fiber" (2)—he also warned that, once the difference between art and empirical reality was erased the artwork would reach "the point of regressing to the status of a mere thing" (103). Authentic modern art is aware of this contradiction and responds by drawing attention to the dialectical movement between reification and aesthetic semblance (or spiritualisation) by means of which the artwork becomes reality's "determinate negation" (89).

Adorno's theory of the sublime proposes that when an artwork confronts us with the power of sensation, our experience can nevertheless be conceptualised, albeit in negative terms, as a negative presentation or as a presentation of the unpresentable. To what extent this aesthetic negativity can function as a riposte to the "withering of experience"[13] in modern life is a crucial question in Adorno's critical theory. His answer can perhaps be found in his (re-)definition of the aesthetic experience—in particular the experience of the sublime, as is argued here—as an enabling force of individuation *against* the dominant social and economic power structures. Adorno repeatedly speaks of the "spell" of external reality over the individual who increasingly feels immobilised and disenfranchised by the powerful administration systems that have consumed modern life. The false models of autonomy offered by the culture industry in the name of consumer choice and agency contribute to the consolidation of a system which is no longer able to think outside of itself. The notion of transcendence is anathema in a climate where, as Adorno puts it—"[r]eal life is becoming indistinguishable from the movies," and "no scope is left for the imagination"[14]—statements which foreshadow Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation according to which the distinction between reality and representation vanishes in the mediatised culture of postmodern, late capitalism.[15] The function of radical artworks in the culture industry remains problematic because their attempts at resistance are easily absorbed into the existing

systems of administration and hegemonic control. Adorno himself posits that art cannot easily claim countercultural significance by proposing images, forms or narratives that are radically oppositional or even new. The social mechanisms of abstraction and alienation have become so totalising that art itself shows the scars of damage in its forms and modes of appearance. In other words, since art is a social fact (*fait social*) it is not immune to these powers. However, for works to be recognised as *art*, they must also contain an element of autonomy and self-sufficiency, the basic Kantian attributes of the aesthetic, and Adorno's project straddles these two seemingly contradictory poles: art as the embodiment as well as the transcendence of social forces.

The sublime, with its profoundly contradictory structure, can become a productive concept only if the demand for reconciling differences is rejected. In other words, if the Kantian third stage of the sublime encounter (where the subject discovers its powers of reason and affirms its superiority over nature's appearance as other) is rejected. Thus Adorno's dictum in *Aesthetic Theory* that modern, authentic art bears the "[s]cars of damage and disruption," which enable it to negate, albeit desperately, the power of the "ever-same" (26), takes on additional significance when read against the background of his reconceptualisation of the Kantian sublime. The aesthetic experience of the sublime thus disturbs the reified concept of the Idea (the Absolute), which German Idealism and metaphysics (Kant and Hegel) elevated above sensuous experience. In contrast, Adorno and Marxist theorists such as Terry Eagleton emphasise the affinity of the sublime with the body and its sensations as a marker of art's relation to damage and suffering.[16] This means that the aesthetic sublime today can no longer be a feeling of exaltation or grandeur—but must look negativity in the eyes.

For Adorno, modern avant-garde art enables the release of the sensuous particular from its submission to the universal, an idea previously proposed by Hegel's definition of art as the sensuous appearance of spirit. But Adorno's aesthetic and social theory, firmly responsive to the developments of capitalism and the conditions of artistic activity in the culture industry, seeks to emancipate the particular from the compulsion of the universal (the spell of totalising reification) by returning to and re-conceptualising the notion of the sublime. For Adorno, the sublime is no longer an escape from the overwhelming impact of external nature (the magnitude of scale and the power of impression), but rather a return to nature (*ein Eingedenken der Natur*) within the subject. This is described as an experience of shudder—in Adorno's reformulation of Burkean terror—as the major effect of the sublime. Shudder is of course a physical sensation, belonging to the regime of the body, but for this sensation to be more than immanent and self-identical, it attaches itself to the process of objectivation (the crystallisation of the compositional elements within the artwork; its composition, its form), which makes the work a work of art. The process of objectivation does not eschew the importance of transcendence but rather affirms the possibility of a "more" inscribed in the aesthetic experience of the sublime. Motivated by the impulse of construction and technique, artworks establish their formal unity in response and opposition to nature which always threatens the subject with "fatal disintegration" (186), and which is recognised in art's mimetic-expressive impulse. Art which is self-identical, able to speak in itself, "becomes eloquent in itself" (112): it does not replicate or represent something beyond itself. But, as Adorno points out, art is also, necessarily, a product of nature and unable to extirpate the semblance of difference or non-identity that nature possesses and which the artwork rescues in the mimetic process, thereby establishing its affinity with nature. This movement away from nature (art as social product and form of objectivation which marks its difference) is

at the same time also a movement towards nature, and the sublime operates as a vehicle for this second movement, or as Adorno calls it, the anamnesis of nature: "Art, the rescue of nature, revolts against nature's transitoriness" (184) by the process of objectivation, but it is this very process that is expressive of art's ability to capture the fleetingness and transitory truth of nature.

This dialectic between objectivation and transitoriness leads Adorno to further insights into the relationship between subject and object, culture and nature, already a key dynamic in Burke's and Kant's understanding of the sublime as a powerful and unsettling encounter with difference. Thus he claims that post-Auschwitz art as the expression of suffering, pain, and damage cannot resist negativity except through a process of mimesis: "Because the spell of external reality over its subjects and their reactions has become absolute, the artwork can only oppose this spell by assimilating itself to it." If authentic art is the "negative imprint of the administered world" (31), it also has the power, through its negativity, to point beyond the world in the gesture of the "as if," as well as the moment of the "more" that appears in an instant (in our encounter with the work), thereby offering the viewer a mode of transcendence. Without inducing this semblance of difference (the artwork's spirit), artworks would be reduced to being merely "things among things" (86), fully incorporated into the representational structures of reality. Art's potential for resistance is thus connected to the production of the anamnesis of the other, a remembering that has been suppressed by the totalising and ideological power of instrumental (discursive) rationality.

I argue that in Adorno's project, the sublime—despite being an aesthetic concept with metaphysical claims for autonomy—fulfils a socio-critical function. Adorno broadly follows the Kantian distinction between subject and object but without prioritising reason. He investigates the inherently dialectical structure of subject and object and argues that both concepts are mediated by their opposite; that is, they contain the other within their own structures. In contrast to the primacy of the transcendental subject in idealist epistemology (post-Kantian metaphysics), Adorno argues for the priority of the object in his materialist dialectical theory of subjectivity, as outlined in "Subject and Object" (1969), where he asserts that subject and object are "mutually mediated—the object by the subject, and even more, in different ways, the subject by the object."[17] This dialectic is embodied in the aesthetic encounter as the experience of relationality and exchange, inviting the spectator/witness to remain open to the unexpected, to the non-identical other.

Adorno's aesthetic theory, with its emphasis on the experience of confrontation, relationality and exchange, seems particularly well suited to an examination of the contemporary dramatic form of live body performance. I now turn to the work of Franko B (Italy/UK) as a contemporary example of the bodily sublime, where the radical expression of physical vulnerability offers through its negativity a promise of reconciliation. I argue that an engagement with and participation in this form of performance art can produce a "limit-experience"[18]—a mode of subjective decentring or intense disorientation as a result of our exposure to the impossible and the formless. Extreme body art and explicit live art events are produced in the spirit of Antonin Artaud for whom theatre was an exceptional form of the limit-experience. A theatre composed of extreme movements "takes dormant images, latent disorder and suddenly carries them to the point of the most extreme gestures. ... develops them to the limit."[19]

In Franko B's performance *Don't Leave Me This Way* (2006–2009) (Fig. 1) the artist sits on a chair on a raised platform, facing the audience with his heavily tattooed but otherwise

Figure 1. "Don't Leave Me This Way," performance by Franko B in collaboration with Kamal Ackarie (2006–2009). Photo Thomas Qualmann. http://www.franko-b.com/Dont_Leave_Me_This_Way.html

naked body. Silent and still he faces us in a darkened theatre space that makes his presence indistinct and opaque, its magnitude palpable and strangely seductive. The problem of *looking* in this space is foregrounded because we cannot "see" what we are seeing; we are denied any clear delineation of the logic of this theatrical relationship, and in the darkness of the space the imagination runs wild. The entire performance consists of a dynamic but disturbingly irregular interplay (or rather an Artaudian assault) of light and darkness, sound and silence. The audience is "attacked" by a sight, by the spectacle of glaring white light and extremely loud, discordant electronic sound, launched at them at unpredictable intervals, creating a terrorising effect. The sensory overload is so extreme that we are unable to see the prone body in front of us. The object (the body) that invites our gaze and our response retreats further and further from our view yet its presence in the space is thereby only heightened. The unbearable intensity of extreme light and sound makes some of the audience avert their gazes or close their eyes, cover their ears and draw back into their seats in foetus positions, trying to turn away from this painful, relentless spectacle, this torture that appears in this instance, in this here and now, again and again. Our attention to our precariousness in the theatre space makes rational reflection impossible, thereby affirming our sense that "something in the live [performance] disrupts processes of recognition."[20] Both the Burkean and the Lyotardian descriptions of sublimity apply to this moment of being hit by an overpowering sensation, which positions the spectator in the presence of the unpresentable and disrupts our orientation in space and time. Curiously, the source of this sublimity (the body) no longer functions as a referential object but retreats further and

further away and is more and more painful to behold. The prevailing darkness (penetrated by disorienting flashes of light and pierced by the erratic electronic soundscape), combined with the unarticulated contract of the performance make it impossible for people to move or leave their seats. The audience is trapped in this visceral limit-situation for about fifteen minutes. Shaken, speechless and dazed the spectators eventually manage to leave the space, their efforts to move away from this scene of excess seeming to be part of the performance.

This may be considered art at a standstill; its power resides in its ability to interrupt personal time and space and to produce an uncanny freezing (or suspension) of the present moment in what Walter Benjamin called *Jetztzeit* (now-time). The present in which "time stands still and has come to a stop"[21] intensifies the disorientating and arresting force of the aesthetic image, which draws us in on the one hand, whilst at the same time spurning and defying our attempts at participation—much less rationalisation—of what is happening. Something takes place, something is being formed, but any sense of this process is only afforded through the accumulating moments of formlessness as the performance unfolds. The notion of the formless, especially in Kant's and in Georges Bataille's definitions, is analogous to the sublime, seeing that the formless paradoxically names that which is nameless and makes us imagine the unimaginable. The unpresentable is, literally, formless, and its appearance in the shape of a limit-experience (the sublime) offers an intensification of sensation as well as an experience of ambiguity, loss, and radical uncertainty. In Franko B's *Don't Leave Me This Way* I no longer know where or who I am. The emotional plea of its title and much of Franko B's other work suggest a sustained engagement with love, passion, surrender, the erotic as well as death, sacrifice and pain. The discourse of the sublime in modern art, especially in explicit live performance, suggests a historical shift from representation to embodiment, thereby inviting philosophical responses that embrace the concepts of aporia and contradiction.

According to Adorno's aesthetic theory, as noted earlier, post-Auschwitz art is devoid of metaphysical meaning and is therefore "negative," but this does not render it incapable of producing semblance and having a transformative effect on its beholder(s). For Adorno, following Kant and Hegel, the telos of authentic art would be the promise of freedom, but this freedom is no longer sought in the transcendental idealist notion of spirit (the Hegelian Absolute or Kant's Noumenon). Rather, in the modern aesthetic experience the search for freedom and the promise of happiness are connected to a recollection (*Eingedenken*, memory) of nature within the self. Adorno's contribution to the discourse of the sublime does not encourage a "flight from history," as presented, for example, in William Cronon's theory, which traces the fascination with nature and the wilderness back to Romantic theories of the sublime.[22] Adorno's return to history does not exclude any engagement with nature or the natural within subjective experience, but rather suggests that the concept of the sublime remains useful because it makes us remember nature within ourselves, reminding us that we are not in control of nature but subjected to it. This realisation does not imply a renunciation of subjectivity, a flight from the self, as suggested by some postmodernist, anti-humanist tendencies; rather, it stems from Adorno's deep concern with the question of human freedom.[23]

Crucial to Adorno's aesthetic theory is his historical critique and reconfiguration of traditional aesthetic concepts and genres (the sublime, tragedy, comedy). The catastrophic history of Enlightenment civilisation has left its mark on all levels of social existence including cultural production. For Adorno, the reification of human relations within advanced

capitalist structures is ideological and totalising, and the possibilities of effective resistance are minimised. Thus in their critique of the culture industry as a form of "mass deception," Adorno and Horkheimer warn of the "absolute power of capitalism" producing a culture that "impresses the same stamp on everything."[24] Any art that could resist such tendencies would need to be a form of "negative presentation," which, as we've seen, was also Kant's description of the sublime.[25] And for Adorno, this need for an art of negative presentation, an art that is oblique and non-representational, emerges from his critique of post-Auschwitz culture. Aligned with, yet different from, Adorno's notion is Lyotard's conceptualisation of the sublime as the presentation of the unpresentable. Both thinkers attempt to historicise the concept of the sublime, but only in Adorno's theory does the bodily sublime function as the evocation of an altered (radical) subjectivity that opposes the withering of experience in the contemporary world. The aesthetic experience of the sublime thus preserves the emancipatory aims of bourgeois subjectivity as well as functioning as a critique of the oppressive effects of any claims to post-Enlightenment self-determination.

To conclude: the sublime experience stages a missed encounter with art, a failure to be fully present even if the event as a whole is structured around the promise of complete presence in the heightened moment of "now." For Adorno, authentic art becomes an expression of suffering when it achieves, through the medium of its style, its own self-negation, expressed as the "necessary failure of the passionate striving for identity."[26] This failure of identity, or the production of a sense of non-identity, is curtailed in the products of the culture industry which tends to classify and schematise our responses to artworks. Franko B's performance *Don't Leave Me This Way* may be said to exemplify this understanding of the sublime by virtue of eliciting the audience's participation (or immersion) in a live event constructed in such a way that its sensory impact cannot be adequately controlled for the duration of the performance. The retreat of the spectators to an awareness of the natural (their instinctive bodily reactions) is expressive of the affective power of the (sublime) aesthetic experience. Franko B's work may also thus be interpreted as a riposte to Frederic Jameson's declaration of a "waning of affect"[27] in postmodernity's depthless and ahistorical decentring of the subject. The overwhelming feeling of being in the presence of an immeasurable "other" may therefore suggest the recovery of the sublime in the aesthetic event, evoking Adorno's sublime shudder and its promise of the possibility of the impossible.

Notes

1. Hauke Brunkhorst, "Irreconcilable Modernity: Adorno's Aesthetic Experimentalism and the Transgression Theorem,' in *The Actuality of Adorno: Critical Essays on Adorno and the Postmodern*, ed. Max Pensky (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 45.
2. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 36–37.
3. See Immanuel Kant, "Of Nature regarded as Might," in *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. H. Bernard (London: Macmillan, 1914), §28, 123–29.
4. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 102.
5. Emily Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 133.
6. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 125.
7. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 14, 15.
8. Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 75, 15.

9. Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 149, 149–50, 150.
10. Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, 152.
11. See Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectic*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: The Seabury Press, 1973).
12. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: The Athlone Press, 1997), 276; hereafter cited in the text.
13. See Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: NLB, 1974).
14. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1997), 126, 127.
15. See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).
16. See Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).
17. Theodor W. Adorno, "Subject and Object," in *The Adorno Reader*, ed. Brian O'Connor (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 139.
18. The concept of the limit-experience as a radical confrontation with the seeming impossibility of living in situations of transgression and excess appears in the writings of Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault. See, for example, Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
19. Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double* (London: Calder, 1993), 18.
20. Andrew Quick, "Taking Place: Encountering the Live," in *Live: Art and Performance*, ed. Adrian Heathfield (London: Tate Publishing, 2004), 94.
21. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 254.
22. See William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 69–90.
23. See Adorno, "Subject and Object," 137–51.
24. Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 120.
25. See Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 143.
26. Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 131.
27. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 15.